

## Sleeping with Herodotus in *The English Patient*

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### Article abstract

Michael Ondaatje's narratological view of history places him in the proximity of postcolonial/postmodern historicism that treats "history" as "text." But while *The English Patient* offers a postcolonial/postmodern critique of *The Histories*, Herodotus cannot simply be dismissed; he is literally bound up with the English patient's life. Ondaatje bifurcates Herodotus into main and supplemental arguments, corresponding to imperial and existential histories — a bifurcation that does not exist in *The Histories*. Such an interpretation is a result of Ondaatje's ongoing reflection on the "text" of Western history in light of its postcolonial/postmodern deconstruction.

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# Sleeping with Herodotus in *The English Patient*

VERNON PROVENCAL

But we were interested in how our lives could mean something to the past. ... We all slept with Herodotus. (Ondaatje, *English* 142)

## 1.

THE AMBIVALENCE<sup>1</sup> OF HERODOTUS as the “Father of History” in *The English Patient* lies at the heart of its enigmatic narrative, which foregrounds what might be best described as Michael Ondaatje’s sense of the “choreography of history.”<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon has usefully characterized Ondaatje’s earlier work as

creating what we might call a “historiographic” referent. Unlike the historical (or real) referent, this one is created in and by the text’s *writing* (hence, *historiographic*). The referent here is doubled; it partakes of two “realities.” ... History, like narrative, becomes therefore a process, not a product. ... Here the processes of recording and narrating history becomes part of the text itself. (*Canadian* 86)

So characterized, Ondaatje’s narratological view of history places him in the proximity of postcolonial/postmodern historicism that treats “history” as “text” (White, Said, Iggers, Himmelfarb). In his novels, the “textual narrative” of history is often fictively reconfigured, as though the relationships between historical events were a matter of mere (Foucauldian?) *propinquity*,<sup>3</sup> Ondaatje’s artistic freedom to reconfigure historical associations as more or less accidental or fatal expresses what I perceive to be his sense of the “choreography of history.”

Admittedly, then, *The English Patient* presents us with a postcolonial/postmodern criticism of *The Histories*, such as that described by Mark Simpson, as “narrating the key yet inadmissible significance of historical invention and narrative instability in traditions of Western epistemology” (221). But Herodotus has such a significant presence,<sup>4</sup> and

there is such empathy aroused in us for the dying English patient clutching his fragmented copy of *The Histories*, that we are warned against simply dismissing the Father of History:

It is the book he brought with him through the fire — a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations — so they are all cradled within the text of Herodotus. (16)

The English patient and Herodotus survive their fiery fall from heaven together, each salvaging the “history” of the other from the flames of destruction. The English patient’s life is literally bound up with Herodotus: he has transformed his copy of *The Histories* into a “commonplace book” by splicing into Herodotus’s narrative fragments of his own personal history: “maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books ... journal notes in his own small handwriting” (96). As a commonplace book, *The Histories* is transformed into a kind of personal and cultural *Waste Land* (“These fragments I have shored against my ruins”)<sup>5</sup>: “I have my notes within it. And cuttings. I need it with me. ... It is unusual for me to travel without it” (231). The cultural symbolism of *The Histories*, as the fount of Western historiography, is thus imported into the novel through its personal meaning for the English patient.

Indeed, it belongs to the narrative strategy of the novel that, for the first half of it, Hana must seek her burned patient’s identity among the fragments of his past preserved in his commonplace Herodotus. As he tells her from the start of their relationship, she must learn how to read him like a historical text: “I have always had information like a sea in me. I am a person who if left alone in someone’s home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us” (18). But even after several months of perusing his commonplace book, Hana has still not learned his identity: “And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus’ *Histories*.... All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron” (96). Like the codebook, *Rebecca*, the clues to his identity in his commonplace book cannot be deciphered without an interpretive key.<sup>6</sup> The key to deciphering the English patient turns out to be the very one he gives Hana for deciphering Herodotus: “‘This history of mine,’ Herodotus says, ‘has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument’” (119).

The effect of having introduced this hermeneutic principle into the narrative is that, at Hana’s next sitting, the English patient himself begins

to narrate the “supplementary to the main argument” of his place in history.<sup>7</sup> It is left to the relentless Caravaggio, a Canadian agent for British intelligence, to turn this voluntary narration into a ruthless series of narcotic interrogations that conclude with the confirmation that the English patient is none other than the Hungarian explorer-turned-Nazi-aide, Count Ladislaus de Almásy. A suspicion introduced midway in the narrative, his identity remains unconfirmed until near the end of the work. By that point, after having listened to Almásy’s story, Caravaggio’s triumph in capturing his quarry’s identity is a hollow victory. Even Caravaggio admits that, “It no longer matters which side he was on during the war” (251). Just as Almásy’s preservation of his personal history in the commonplace Herodotus subverts the main argument of the Herodotean narrative by emending the text with extraneous documents and personal notes, so does Almásy’s supplementary account of his actions threaten to subvert the validity of Caravaggio’s confirmation of his official place in history as the Nazi collaborator. Indeed, the record of Almásy’s own account of his actions is such as to call into question the legitimacy of the principal impulses and beliefs that continue to create and preserve the historical record of human achievement known to the West as “history.”

## 2.

Reading Herodotus as a bifurcated text also turns out to be the hermeneutic key to understanding the ambivalence of his role as the Father of History in the narrative of *The English Patient*. Corresponding to the bifurcation of Herodotus is the bifurcation of history itself. This is a complicated matter in that the novel contains more than one “history” in the sense of presenting more than one view of history. In this sense, there are four “histories”: the imperial (essentialist) history of *progress*; the existential history of *process*; the postcolonial history of *liberation*; and the postimperial history of *penitence*.<sup>8</sup> Imperial history is the traditional view of history in the West that stems from Herodotus’s Eurocentric distinction between Greek and barbarian; it is the imperial record of achievement that claims to have discovered the New World, to have explored the Dark Continent. Against the imperial history stands the revolutionary postcolonial history that redefines this record of human achievement as a Eurocentric falsification of the past, a brutal record of European oppression of non-Europeans. Beyond the conflict of these histories lies a postimperial view of history, one that begins by accepting the damning image of how the West *ought* to see itself in light of the atomic flash that illuminates the consequences of im-

perial “history” — the American bombing of Japan — news of which broadcasts the “death of a civilization” (286).

The proper subject for this postcolonial history lesson is the European existentialist,<sup>9</sup> the dying white European male, who has lost his faith in the imperial history of progress and has taken refuge in the existential history of endless process, in what is really a form of anti-historicism. But there is no safe refuge to be found there either: ultimately there is, as the English patient finds, no escape from history. It belongs specifically to the Western (“the English” 286) reader of *The English Patient* to read herself or himself in the fate of the dying English patient, and to advance toward a postimperial view of the world and history. Perhaps in the final diptych of Hana dropping a glass in Canada as Kirpal catches a fork in India, we are moved toward a (pluralist?) global view of history that is advanced through the dichotomy of postcolonial and postimperial.<sup>10</sup> And it may be that we are meant to contemplate this image in light of Almásy’s vision of individuals as “communal histories” (261).

With respect to understanding the role of Herodotus in *The English Patient*, we may simplify matters by noting that of these four “histories” only two are primary. Although present from the beginning of the work, the postcolonial and postimperial histories of Kirpal Singh and Ladislaus de Almásy are suppressed until the final scene of conflict between them — Kirpal’s bitter rejection of his Herodotus-laden friend in light of the news of the bombing of Hiroshima. For the most part, *The English Patient* unfolds within the simple bifurcation of history into the imperial history of *progress* and the existential history of *process*, which corresponds to the bifurcation of Herodotus into its “main” argument and that which is “supplementary” to it. It is by attending to the dynamics of this bifurcated reading of Herodotus and of history in Almásy’s narration of his past that we begin to comprehend the ambivalence of Herodotus.

### 3.

In 1930 we had begun mapping the greater part of the Gilf Kebir Plateau, looking for the lost oasis that was called Zezura. ... We were desert Europeans. ... Look at a map of the Libyan Desert and you will see names. Kemal el Din in 1925, who, almost solitary, carried out the first great modern expedition. Bagnold 1930-1932. Almásy-Madox 1931-1937. (135-36)

Almásy’s account of his life begins *in medias res*, at about the age of thirty-five, when he joined that branch of the Geographical Society in

London whose members appear in the novel as the heirs of Herodotus in his role as explorer of the North African desert:

There is, after Herodotus, little interest by the Western world towards the desert for hundreds of years. ... And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history on this pocket of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions and followed by modest lectures given at the Geographical Society in London at Kensington Gore. (133)

The desert explorers make up a detached branch of the Society. Attached to their “half-invented”(150) worlds of exploration, they have lost their bearings in the daily commerce of civilized life. They meet in near anonymity, coming from all nations to partake of a professional identity that transcends nationality.<sup>11</sup> Their meetings focus on the work of geographical exploration, where “All human and financial behaviour lies on the far side of the issue being discussed — which is the earth’s surface and its ‘interesting geographical problems’” (134).

A principal source for Ondaatje’s account of the Geographical Society is a paper read by Richard Bermann at the “Evening Meeting of the Society on 8 January 1934,” together with the ensuing discussion recorded in the minutes of that meeting, as published in the 1934 issue of the *Geographical Journal*.<sup>12</sup> The document would have been an important find for Ondaatje, since it reflects the status of Herodotus within the Geographical Society, as well as the European establishment, four years before the outbreak of World War II.

Bermann was a close friend of Almásy, whom he accompanied on a 1933 expedition in search of the fabled Wadi [Valley] of Zerzura in the Libyan Desert. “As the expedition’s official chronicler,” he tells us, “I was in charge of our travelling library, which, I am sorry to state, mainly consisted of one book: of the ‘Histories’ of old Herodotus, the best Baedeker of the Libyan Desert still existing” (458). According to Bermann, Herodotus was instrumental in their discovery of what he and Almásy believed to be the fabled Wadi of Zerzura: “Having this book only I had come to know it rather well, and so, in the sight of the jars of Abu Ballas, I read to my companions the following passage from the sixth and seventh chapters of the Third Book of Herodotus” (458). This expedition is recounted in *The English Patient* by Almásy in chapter four, “South Cairo 1930-1938” (131-45), which account also acknowledges the aid of Herodotus in the discovery of Zerzura. “We find jars at Abu Ballas with the classic Greek amphora shape. Herodotus speaks of such jars” (140).

The minutes record several responses to Bermann's paper that focus on the role attributed to Herodotus. The first response is made by "the Austrian Minister" who is proud to congratulate Bermann as a "compatriot." He and Bermann were "for a considerable time fellow-prisoners ... not ... as you may imagine, in the deserts in the heart of Africa; we were prisoners, as it were, in the heart of France during the peace negotiations. ... But those times are far away and will never return" (464). The Minister begins by mentioning the previous achievement of another Austrian explorer who discovered an Arctic region that he named "Franz Josef Land," after the Austrian Emperor, and points out that "Austrian scientists have for more than thirty years been engaged ... in bringing to light the monuments" of the past (Bermann 464). He then proceeds, within this nationalistic context, to congratulate "One of the newest of Austrian explorers, Dr Bermann" for having "rendered such distinguished service to science" (465). He concludes his speech with a rhetorical flourish, one that ties together the strains of scientific internationalism, cultural nationalism, and Western imperialism by expressing his "wish that your great Society may continue with ever-increasing success its great work for the benefit of science, the glory of Great Britain, and the enlightenment of humanity" (465). Within the context of these remarks, so extraordinarily representative of the charged political atmosphere of Europe in 1934, the Austrian Minister makes his cultured reference to Herodotus: "I will not detail you further because I am sure you all feel, like myself, a desire to return and to read that wonderful book of Herodotus, and then go to bed to dream about Ethiopian troglodytes" (465).

The overlapping of references to the *nationless* heart of the desert, the *international* community of science, the *nationalistic* boast of imperialist "discovery," and the political fragmentation of the European community by war is most striking in the Minister's speech. It is ironic that such a man, so conscious of his place in history, should give such damning praise to Herodotus as basically a fabulous storyteller. The cultural union of the European nations by way of a common history that goes back to Herodotus is felt as a thin veneer glossed over their political differences. Nonetheless, Herodotus's time-honoured position as Father of the historical narrative that preserves the record of European achievement remains secure.

The next response is by none other than the Herodotean scholar (and future author of *Herodotus, Father of History*), John L. Myres, at that time Wykeham Professor of Ancient History in the University of Oxford: "We are delighted that Herodotus, who provided that best of guide-books, has once more deserved his reputation — has once more been

proved to have known what he was talking about — when he described the cave-dwellers in the Libyan hinterland” (465). The scholarly pride and delight that Myres takes in Herodotus is endearing, but the eagerness of the academic to serve the imperialist interests of nations, which finance explorations in order to exploit their discoveries, is somewhat alarming. (Imagine the fictional if not the historical Almásy’s dismay!)

The last response is by a fellow member of the expedition, Lieutenant Wingate, who disparages the use of Herodotus in geographic exploration as unscientific and misleading: “What Herodotus says about the land of the troglodytes is not in reference to ‘Zerzura,’ a legend of a different and later origin, and it may or may not refer to the same place” (468). Wingate represents a practical, militaristic interest in a scientific approach to exploration of the desert, which no doubt serves a similar (British) nationalist interest as that espoused by the Austrian Minister. (He might possibly be part of Ondaatje’s Geoffrey Clifton, who turns out to be working for British intelligence, and indirectly causes Almásy’s arrest as a spy). Wingate’s attitude is most opposed to the “romantic” praise of Herodotus given by Bermann and Myres. These opposed views of Herodotus are translated into *The English Patient*. The historical rift between the “scientific” Wingate who disparages Herodotus and the “romantic” Bermann who embraces him, finds its fictional expression in the rift that develops between the Geographical Society as a whole, with its ties to the establishment, and its detached branch of desert explorers:

The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever. (141)

The Geographical Society appears, in fact, to be caught between these two worlds: on the one hand lie its ties to the European establishment, with its uneasy balance of national (political) and international (cultural) interests among various nations; on the other hand lie the international activities and nationless sentiments of its desert explorers. Even a foreign diplomat could see that there was a world of difference between the heart of the desert and the heart of Europe.

As heirs of Herodotus, Bermann and Almásy belong to the detached branch of the Geographical Society that in the field constitutes an “oasis society”: “We were a small clutch of a nation between the wars, mapping



and re-exploring. We gathered at Dakhla and Kufra as if they were bars or cafes. An oasis society, Bagnold called it" (136). Unlike the formal society that met biweekly for impersonal meetings at Kensington Gore in London, they knew each other intimately. Perhaps this was because "in the emptiness of deserts you are always surrounded by lost history" (135). Over the years, they began to lose their identity to the desert where nationhood ceased to have significance. To Almásy, nationhood became loathsome:

By 1932, Bagnold was finished and Madox and the rest of us were everywhere. Looking for the lost army of Cambyses. Looking for Zerzura. 1932 and 1933 and 1934. Not seeing each other for months. Just the Bedouin and us, crisscrossing the Forty Days Road. There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African — all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations. (138)

The desert of the oasis society is described by Almásy as constantly swept by hordes of winds, scourges of the desert waging war on the trespass of humankind — individuals, nomads, armies, villages — sometimes even sweeping out to attack the great centres of European civilization, ever threatening to reclaim the earth:<sup>13</sup>

There is a whirlwind in southern Morocco, the *aajej*, against which the fellahin defend themselves with knives. There is the *africo*, which has at times reached into the city of Rome. ... These are permanent winds that live in the present tense.

There are other, less constant winds that change direction, that can knock down horse and rider and realign themselves anticlockwise. The *bist rož* leaps into Afghanistan for 170 days — burying villages. ... As well as the other "poison winds," the *simoom*, of North Africa. ... There are always millions of tons of dust in the air, just as there are millions of cubes of air in the earth and more living flesh in the soil (worms, beetles, underground creatures) than there is grazing and existing on it. Herodotus records the death of various armies engulfed in the *simoom*

who were never seen again. One nation was "so enraged by this evil wind that they declared war on it and marched out in full battle array, only to be rapidly and completely interred." (16-17)

With the passage of time, the desert winds strip away all vestiges of human history: the historical identity of nation-states and of individuals, who be-

long to a certain time, a certain place, a certain people. For the members of the oasis society, the desert erased their European history, and enabled them to escape it. The desert also revealed itself to them as a place of faith, that transcended history — a holy place that could not be owned:

The desert could not be claimed or owned — it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures, left nothing behind, not an ember. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. We left the harbours of oasis. The places water came to and touched ... *Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf*. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert. (138-39; original ellipsis)

Some members of the Society betrayed the sanctity of the desert: engaging in European acts of imperialism, “some wanted to leave their mark there. On that dry water-course, on this shingled knoll. Small vanities in this plot of land northwest of the Sudan, south of Cyrenaica” (139). Fenelon-Barnes, who had a “small Arab girl tied up” in his bed (138), was the sort of Judas who betrayed the desert faith by wanting “the fossil trees he discovered to bear his name. He even wanted a tribe to take his name, and spent a year on the negotiations. Then Bauchan outdid him, having a type of sand dune named after him” (139).

Almásy, Bagnold, Bermann and Madox, however, were purified by the desert's sand and fire. Almásy, in particular, was cleansed of all craving for fame, what Herodotus calls *kleos*, and the imperial impulse to map the world in one's image, to claim it as one's own. Not only did Almásy erase his name from the desert; he used the desert to erase his name from the European history of nations: “But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war had arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation” (139).

Ironically, the “bible” of this society of men who practically turn their backs on history is the work traditionally credited with inventing history, Herodotus's *Histories*: “We were young. We knew power and great finance were temporary things. We all slept with Herodotus” (142). The irony here is not obvious and simple: it is not that they simply worship in ignorance what they profess to despise. That would not be a case

of irony, but of unfathomable naïveté. The irony here is complex and subtle in a way that is typically postmodern, and characteristically postcolonial: that is to say, the irony of their antihistorical attachment to the Father of History is radical and subversive.

#### 4.

I have seen editions of *The Histories* with a sculpted portrait on the cover. Some statue found in a French museum. But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. (118-19)

What must be taken into account to fathom the ironic attachment of the oasis society to Herodotus is the bifurcation of *The Histories* into its main and supplementary arguments, and how this split is representative of a corresponding bifurcation of history into the imperial history of progress and the existential history of process. On the one hand is the “official” Herodotus, canonized by academics and historians; on the other is the “subversive” Herodotus, whose *Histories* becomes the bible of Almásy’s oasis society.

The official Herodotus is represented by Almásy’s quotation of the beginning of *The Histories*, the opening line of the prefatory section known as the Proem:

*I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what Man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds manifested by both Greeks and Barbarians ... together with the reason they fought one another.* (240)

This passage is quoted at a significant point in the narrative, where it reports the suicide of Madox, who “died because of nations.” As the Father of History, Herodotus preserves in the main argument of the *Histories* the “official” record of the past, of the great achievements of men — specifically, of white European males — of wars fought between “us,” the civilized societies of the West that trace their history to ancient Greece, and “them,” the barbarians of the East, the indigenous peoples of the non-European world. This is the Herodotus whose history is a chronicle of “(white) firsts,” the original archive of the relentless partition of the earth by imperial right of conquest.

The official Herodotus is really of no interest to the youthful devotion of the oasis society, who set themselves beyond the older world of the

Geographical Society, so far as it remained in “correspondence” with “servants and slaves and tides of power”:

When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself. (141-42)

*The Histories* as it is read by the oasis society is a *subversive* work that *undoes* this official record of human achievement by setting it in the context of the triumph of time over human ambition. History, as it is known to the oasis society, is the history of the desert, the interminable flow of sand through the Heraclitean hourglass of time. History, in this sense, is not about the preservation of human achievement, the glorious deeds of individuals, the names of families, the conquests of nations; rather, history in Almásy's sense is about the erasure of this record. In Almásy's Herodotus, history is not about fighting for one's self and one's nation to secure one's place in the future, but about surrendering one's self to the indomitable passage of time that comes into perspective when one looks to past civilizations and empires that have risen and fallen, come and gone. The subversive Herodotus, which is obtained by attending only to the supplementary argument, is represented by the quotation of the final passage of the Proem, again at a significant point in the narrative, when Almásy begins to relate his affair with Katharine: “*For those cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before. ... Man's good fortune never abides in the same place*” (142). The irony, then, of Almásy worshipping Herodotus is made explicable by taking into account these two opposed views of history and of Herodotus in *The English Patient*. The main argument of the imperial Herodotus, which lies on one side of the Geographic Society, in its connection with the established order, is subverted by the supplementary argument of the existential Herodotus, which lies on the other side with the oasis society.

## 5.

The ambivalence of Herodotus in the oasis society is represented by Almásy's obliteration of the main argument of the Herodotean narrative — its imperial chronicle of nations at war — through the expansion of its supplementary argument with maps and other impersonal documents pertain-

ing to desert exploration. But there is yet a deeper level of ambivalence concerning Herodotus and history to be found in *The English Patient*. It emerges with the dramatic expansion in the supplementary argument of Almásy's commonplace Herodotus, and an equally dramatic change in its relation to the main argument. These dramatic changes are effected by Almásy's affair with Katharine Clifton, which leads to his own dramatic transformation from Hungarian explorer to Nazi aide, and ultimately to his becoming the anonymous English patient:

"This history of mine," Herodotus says, "has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument." What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history — how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love. (119)

As a member of the oasis society, prior to his affair with Katharine, Almásy views the supplementary argument as pertaining only to an impersonal interest in the past that despises involvement with the contemporary affairs of nations, which constitute the main argument of history. When he is the burned "English patient," consequent upon his affair with Katharine, the supplementary argument extends also to the personal histories of those who live in inescapable proximity to the main argument of nations at war. It is as part of the supplementary argument now defined as consisting of the cul-de-sacs of love and betrayal that Almásy has added to the main narrative his own *historia* of love and betrayal. (The act remains subversive, for it simultaneously destroys the main narrative.)

He bought pale brown cigarette papers and glued them into sections of *The Histories* that recorded wars that were of no interest to him. He wrote down all her arguments against him. Glued into the book — giving himself only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the "he." (172)

By the time he has come to narrate his past to Hana, what constitutes the supplementary argument of history for Almásy has changed dramatically. While it is still governed by an impersonal and existential view of history as process, it is no longer indifferent to the personal histories of individuals caught up in the "sweep of history." The supplementary argument now contains these personal histories, and does so as existing in at least a tangential relationship with the main argument of history. The principle of the coincidence of the personal and historical is described as "propinquity" (nearness, proximity). It is introduced in chapter five, "Katharine," and belongs to Katharine's recollection of Almásy's explanation of the origins of their affair:

He said later it was propinquity. Propinquity in the desert. It does that here, he said. He loved the word — the propinquity of water, the propinquity of two or three bodies in a car driving the Sand Sea for six hours. Her sweating knee beside the gearbox of the truck, the knee swerving, rising with the bumps. In the desert you have time to look everywhere, to theorize on the choreography of all things around you. ... For him all relationships fell into patterns. You fell into propinquity or distance. Just as, for him, the histories in Herodotus clarified all societies. (150)

Propinquity, or coincidental proximity, appears here as an existential principle of historical patterning underlying the “choreography of history.” Given its Herodotean context, however, it suggests a deeper, *fatal* connection between personal histories and the “sweep of history,” “all cradled within the text of Herodotus.”

Almásy's affair with Clifton's wife was precipitated by Katharine's reading of the story of Candaules from Herodotus. Prior to meeting Katharine, Almásy had no interest in the story of Candaules: “I always skim past that story. It is early in the book and has little to do with the places and period I am interested in” (232). That is to say, he had no interest in the “cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history.” But having heard Katharine read the story of Candaules to himself and her husband, he is moved to abandon the impersonal indifference of the oasis society and enter the private realm of personal history. Seduced, as it were, by a story in the supplementary argument of Herodotus, he inevitably comes into contact with its main argument, the “sweep of history” made up of the conflict of nations. Thus, in his commonplace book, the two histories converge at the point where his private affair with Katharine becomes the first step toward his public act of treason. As he learns from Caravaggio, this convergence took place from the moment he fell in love with her: “You had become the enemy not when you sided with Germany but when you began your affair with Katharine Clifton” (254-55).

The ambivalence of Herodotus in *The English Patient* is deepened with the inevitable involvement of the supplementary and main arguments of history, whereby personal aspirations lead to tragic historical consequences. It is felt most strongly when Almásy recounts how, in September 1939, he left his Herodotus with Katharine in the cave of swimmers (174, 249) and went in search of help, only to be taken prisoner, mistaken at that point for a “just another possible second-rate spy” (251). Consequently, he agreed to collaborate with the Nazis in 1941, and led Rommel's spy, Eppler, across the Libyan desert to Cairo, as a way of returning to retrieve Kath-

arine's corpse in 1942 (254). The ambivalence of Herodotus resides in the futility of Almásy's attempt to escape the competing claims of nations for the lands of the earth: "All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (261). At this point, Herodotus no longer represents the separation and opposition of the personal and historical, but of their tragic entanglement. The ambivalence of Herodotus is to be a single text containing the private histories of individuals seeking a life outside history within the very narrative sweep of history they seek to escape.

The ambivalence of Herodotus is taken one step further when Kirpal Singh uses it as a symbol of Western historicism responsible for the "death of a civilization" (286), having most in mind the main argument of imperial history ("the histories" 283). As suggested earlier, this points toward a postimperial penitent view of history, which is not entirely divorced from Herodotus, since the proper subject for this history lesson is the European who still clutches his beloved Herodotus as a bifurcated text, containing the supplementary to the main argument. Nevertheless, what remains at the end of Almásy's narrative is his failure, as a Nazi aide who betrays the good of humanity for the love of another man's wife, to escape the judgement of history. By destroying the historical record of Herodotus, Almásy destroys himself. He does this, as Kirpal Singh points out, by making Herodotus his own — erasing the public record of human achievement that belongs to nations, and gluing into it fragments of the history of his own life: "his holy book, whatever he had loved glued into his own" (294). By his very attempt to erase history, he inevitably enters its main argument of the conflict of nations by way of supplementing it with his own cul-de-sac of love and betrayal. In the end, therefore, it is the ambivalence of Herodotus in *The English Patient* that enables him to persevere as the Father of History.

## 6.

What is unique about Ondaatje's treatment of Herodotus in *The English Patient* is Almásy's *romantic* definition of the "supplementary to the main argument" as the "cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history — how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love" (119). It is not a definition to be found in Herodotus, and therefore must be regarded as a more general interpretation of the thematic structure of the *Histories*. It seems reasonable, if only to better grasp Ondaatje's use of Herodotus in *The English Patient*, to conclude this study by way of evaluating the validity of his presentation of Herodotus as a bifurcated text.

The Herodotean phrase translated in *The English Patient* as “This history of mine has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument” (119) is a parenthetical comment made in book four of the *Histories*. Herodotus’s Greek text, transliterated into English, is *prosthēkas gar dé moi ho logos ex archēs edizhēto*; a literal translation would be, “for this account [*logos*] of mine has from the beginning sought out additional material [*prosthēkas*]” (*Hdt.* 4.30.1.)<sup>14</sup> Though parenthetical, the comment is noteworthy and treated by Herodotean scholars as perhaps referring generally to Herodotus’s habit of digressing from his main theme to include material of apparently tangential interest.<sup>15</sup> That is precisely the sense rendered by Grene’s translation used by Ondaatje.

Herodotus makes the comment where he has embarked on the Scythian “*logos*,” an ethnographic account of the origin and customs of the Scyths, a people against whom Darius, the Persian king, launched an unsuccessful invasion. After reporting several accounts he knew of concerning the origins of the Scyths, Herodotus declares his intent to digress. The Herodotean scholar, J.A.S. Evans, sums up his ensuing digression as follows:

Hereupon Herodotus digresses, with the remark (4.30.1) that the plan of his *History* required digressions. He does not return to the Scyths until he has rambled over a number of topics. Mules could not be bred in Elis, which piqued Herodotus’ interest in the effects of the environment, but he knew no reason for this phenomenon. The Scyths reported that in the far north, the air was filled with feathers, which Herodotus thought were snowflakes. At last he reaches a major digression, on the Hyperboreans. (67)

Herodotus’s interest in the inability to breed mules in the cold climate of Elis is obviously a far cry from Almásy’s romantic reference to “cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history — how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love.” Of course, this only shows that Ondaatje’s Almásy has the more general method of Herodotean digression in mind, and most especially his inclusion of such stories as that of Candaules. On the other hand, it is equally clear that Almásy’s romantic definition is not truly representative of the range or nature of Herodotean digression and the contents of the “supplementary to the main argument.” For the most part, Herodotean digressions are made up of additional material that belongs to his interest in the ethnographies of other nations — the history, geography, customs, and traditions that constitute a nation. His



interest in the environment of nations is evidence of his debt to the Ionian tradition of ethnography, which viewed the environment as having an influence on the natures and customs of various peoples.<sup>16</sup>

It seems reasonable, then, to say that Almásy's interpretation says more about *his* Herodotus, especially as he has transformed it into a commonplace book, than it does about Herodotus himself. But it may also be reasonable to say, in light of Ondaatje's romantic fictionalization of marginal historical figures in his preceding works, that Almásy's Herodotus symbolizes Ondaatje's own interpretation of Herodotus and of history as well. In other words, the Herodotus of *The English Patient* may very much be Ondaatje's Herodotus, in the sense of symbolizing his own view of history as constituting a complex dialectic constructed of a main narrative concerning nations at war supplemented with the personal histories of marginal figures like Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, and Count Ladislaus de Almásy. Characteristic of Ondaatje's fictionalization of such figures is his tendency to romanticize them as neo-Byronic heroes alienated from society, lonely men attached to women who love them, as Katharine loves Almásy, in spite of themselves. These are the lives that make up the "cul-de-sacs" of history — dead-end lives of desperation condemned to footnotes in the grand historical narrative.

One way of judging the distance between Ondaatje's Herodotus and Herodotus in his own right is to look at the status of the story of Candaules in each. Ondaatje's treatment of the story in *The English Patient* suggests that it belongs to "the supplementary to the main argument" of personal histories recounting "how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love." For Herodotus, however, it constitutes the beginning of his main narrative, which concerns the causes of the war between Europe and Asia. The story of Candaules (*Hdt.* 1.7-15) is the starting point for his explanation of how Croesus, the Asian King of Lydia, came to be the first Oriental despot to systematically subject the Greeks to foreign rule, since before the rule of Croesus, all Greeks were free. The story of Candaules explains how Croesus came to the throne as the last descendant of the Mermnad dynasty established by Gyges, who had taken the throne from the last of the Heraclid dynasty, Candaules.

There is not really to be found in Herodotus, then, the bifurcation of history that is represented in Ondaatje's Herodotus.<sup>17</sup> Almásy's bifurcation of Herodotus into its main and supplementary arguments, corresponding to imperial and existential histories, is an Ondaatjean construct, and should be taken as the result of his ongoing reflection on the "text" of Western history in light of its postcolonial/postmodern deconstruction.

The very ambivalence of Herodotus in *The English Patient* compels us to engage in a meaningful dialogue with our imperial past — and our postimperial future. The starting point of that dialogue would seem to be the need to recognize that it is impossible for us to do otherwise. We can neither forget the past nor turn away from it as something now behind us. History is the awareness of the past as inescapably present: there is no escaping Herodotus. In the end, the English patient prefers to sleep, and therefore to die, with *his* Herodotus, in which his own life is intimately bound up with history. Such is the ambivalence of sleeping with Herodotus in *The English Patient*.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ambivalence is a key concept in postcolonial theory. “A term first developed in psychoanalysis ... [and later a]dapted into colonial discourse theory by Homi Bhabha, it describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized” (Ashcroft 12). For an introduction to the basic concepts and theoretical difficulties in postcolonial studies, see Bart Moore-Gilbert. (I am indebted to John Eustace of the English Department at Acadia University for his guidance in the field of postcolonial studies, though he should not be held responsible for any inadequacy in the views expressed in this paper.)

<sup>2</sup>“Choreography” is a word favoured by Ondaatje. While discussing the relationship between historical research and poetic invention in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje commented, “I don’t want to know everything about the desert in 1935. I needed space to invent, choreograph” (Dafoe). Almásy says, “In the desert you have time to look everywhere, to theorize on the choreography of all things around you” (150). The reader familiar with Ondaatje’s *oeuvre* (nearly a pre-requisite, since Hana and Caravaggio are carried over from his earlier work, *In the Skin of a Lion*) would be familiar with Ondaatje’s obsession with the “choreography of history.”

<sup>3</sup>“I am concerned here [in *The Order of Things*] with observing how a culture experiences the *propinquity* of things, how it establishes the *tabula* of their relationships and the order by which they must be considered” (Foucault, “Preface” xxiv; emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup>See the following list of entries by Lisa Mirabile: “Herodotus as man of the desert (English patient’s vision), 118-1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1890 edition: as English patient’s commonplace book, 16-17, 58, 94-95, 133, 172, 246; Hana reads journal entry after English patient falls asleep, 97-98; English patient denies Katharine’s request to borrow, 231; as English patient’s guide to society, 150, 246; English patient leaves with Katharine in cave, 174, 249; as holy book to Kip, 294; Katharine reads Candaules-Gyges story from aloud, 118-19, 232-24, 240.”

<sup>5</sup>*The Waste Land* l. 430. The principal setting of *The English Patient*, a burned out chapel with its ruined library, makes further reference to Eliot’s imagery. Linda Hutcheon regards Ondaatje’s use of fragmentation as a postmodern debt to a modernist innovation (*Canadian* 84). Of the commonplace book, Hutcheon notes that, “Here, Almásy’s strange commonplace book ... becomes an allegory of the book we are reading, with the *Histories* (and history) in the background and other texts suggested through plot details or images” (“Empire”).

<sup>6</sup>As Caravaggio explains to Hana, “In 1942 the Germans sent a spy called Eppler into Cairo before the battle of El Alamein. He used a copy of Daphne du Maurier’s novel *Rebecca*

as a code book to send messages back to Rommel on troop movements. Listen, the book became bedside reading with British Intelligence. Even I read it" (164). He later declares to Almásy, "Only you could have gotten Rommel's man into Cairo with his copy of *Rebecca*" (254). Ondaatje basically repeated Almásy's explanation in his interview with Willem Dafoe, who played Caravaggio in the film production of *The English Patient*, adding, "Ken Follet wrote a book about it called *The Key to Rebecca*" (Dafoe). In *The Key to Rebecca*, Follett's British Intelligence officer, Vandam, explains why a novel was used as a codebook: "A book code was a variation on the one-time pad. ... A book code used the pages of a printed book in the same way, except that the sheets were not necessarily destroyed after use" (143). Ondaatje's fragmentation of the narrative in *The English Patient* makes it into a kind of codebook as well.

<sup>7</sup> Almásy's name first appears in the narrative in the opening pages of the 'South Cairo' section (134-35) that prefaces Hana's sitting: "By the mid 1930s the lost oasis of Zerzura was found by Ladislaus de Almásy and his companions" (134). Ostensibly, the author/narrator provides a historical background to the account which Almásy gives to Hana.

<sup>8</sup> These identifications are my own, based on my reading of the text in light of my study of twentieth-century historiography; they are not explicitly identified by Ondaatje. Of two — the imperial and postcolonial — I am fairly confident in the accuracy of their nomenclature; of the other two — existential and postimperial — I am not. I would say that existential identifies a loss of faith in history as progress that occurred between the world wars and pervades Eliot's *The Waste Land*. By postimperial, I mean the emerging struggle in the West to come to grips with its own history in light of the postcolonial critique. The postcolonial critique offers the tools of deconstruction and demands that we dismantle the "grand narrative" based on essentialist assumptions as the first requirement of a necessary reconstruction of history in the West out of a confession of its crimes against humanity.

<sup>9</sup> "I'll leave you your radio to swallow your history lesson," says Kip bitterly, as he (re)claims his (postcolonial) identity as Kirpal Singh (285). He says this to the dying English patient, clutching his fragmented copy of Herodotus, which he refers to in the end as "the burned man's book, his holy book" (294). Simpson's postcolonial view of Herodotus is found in Kirpal's rejection of Herodotus as an imperial, rather than existential, text. But while Kirpal returns to the East, we return with Hana to the West, which brings us back to the world left behind by the English patient. With the publication of *Anil's Ghost*, the postcolonial rejection of imperial history in *The English Patient* can now be studied in light of the enigmatic figure of the Oriental historian, Palipana. The question is whether Palipana represents a (Foucauldian?) response to what Hayden White defines as a *metahistorical* view of "historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (*Tropics* 82).

<sup>10</sup> Ajay Heble provides a useful study of Ondaatje's earlier work in relation to the postmodern historiographic discourse of Hayden White and the postcolonial historiographic discourse of Edward Said (98-99). Ondaatje is positioned in most studies of his work as a postcolonialist/postmodernist. Joseph Pesch argues that *The English Patient* "undermines History as master-narrative and reveals the constructedness of 'facts,' 'reality,' and 'identity'" (132). Susan Ellis finds in Ondaatje's work an "emerging postcolonial world view" (25), expressed in Almásy's "rejection of names" that "links problematic ownership with the issues of nationalism and colonialism in the text" (27).

<sup>11</sup> "These men of all nations travel at that early evening hour, six o'clock, when there is the light of the solitary. It is an anonymous time, most of the city is going home" (133). Ondaatje may be invoking the bleak atmosphere of Eliot's "Preludes": "Six o'clock. / The

burnt out ends of smoky days. / ... And at the corner of the street / A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps. / And then the lighting of the lamps.”

<sup>12</sup> Cited under “Acknowledgements” (305).

<sup>13</sup> This passage is the first that Hana reads (for us, at least) from Almásy’s commonplace book — a non-Herodotean fragment that refers to Herodotus. The source of its description of the desert winds is identified in the “Acknowledgements” (305) as a passage from “Hassanein Bey’s article, ‘Through Kufra to Darfur’ (1924), describing sandstorms.”

<sup>14</sup> The literal translation is my own of the Oxford text prepared by Hude. Powell translates *prosthékas* here as “excursus;” Liddell, Scott, Stuart Jones, and McKenzie give “addition, appendage, supplement.”

<sup>15</sup> The principal English commentary on Herodotus (How and Wells) finds that “H.’s artless confession of his tendency to ‘digress’ is amusing” (313). Macan complains that it is a “passage that has been too generally taken as raising the whole problem of the times, places, and methods of composition betrayed by the work of Herodotus, as if this passage must needs have been an *additum* to the ‘first edition’ or draught of the whole work” (20). For the reader who shares Ondaatje’s interest in history and discourse, which is key to his use of Herodotus in *The English Patient*, the more recent comment by the influential French scholar, Francois Hartog, is perhaps of greatest interest (and would have been available to Ondaatje while writing the *Patient* as well): “In the *Histories* ... a digression is the general rule in the journey and also a rule of discourse. That is a less exaggerated statement than it might seem. Consider the following declaration made by the narrator: ‘it was ever the way of my *logos* to seek after digressions [*prostékas edizeto*].’ They were not thrust on him nor did he simply stumble upon them; on the contrary, the purpose of his travels is to seek them out” (343-44).

<sup>16</sup> The Hippocratic treatise, *Airs, Waters, Places*, is the prime example of “environmental determinism” in this ethnographic tradition. On Herodotus’s relation to this tradition, Rosalind Thomas argues that “[certain] passages [in Herodotus] suggest that institutions, customs, laws, are indeed fully part of the analysis of ‘ethnic’ character, and a part in historical explanation, and that a much subordinate part belongs to the geographical and climatic factors which must set the scene and create possibilities for certain human customs (as for example the Scythians) but which are not determinants in any absolute sense ... It has perhaps been exaggerated [by scholars] by some sort of conscious or unconscious comparison with *Airs*, and a simplified reading of *Airs* at that” (112).

<sup>17</sup> Hartog treats the distinction between the main thread of the Herodotean narrative and its digressions as “bifurcations in his text” (344), but it does not have the significance or meaning attributed to it in *The English Patient*.

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